

Editorial by Earl Blumenauer for
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The Farm Bill, passed by the House last week and which the Register-Guard aptly deemed “farm waste,” still has a long way to go. After working for five years since the last reauthorization, I was, to say the very least, disappointed that we could not convince the House to approve a major reform amendment that I cosponsored nor even offer other, narrower initiatives to improve the 2007 Farm Bill.

The good news is that we don't have to wait another five years to achieve reform. As the Farm Bill winds its way through the legislative process in the Senate, there is ample opportunity to seize the moment. While people are fired up in Washington, D.C. and at home, I propose five, simple steps the Senate can take to craft a Farm Bill that is better for Oregon farmers and the vast array of other stakeholders.

1. The House has exploded the myth that we can't limit who gets subsidies and how much they get. Currently, 13% of those receiving farm payments get 75% of the money, which is grossly unfair. The Senate should put meaningful limits on farms subsidies with a maximum payment of \$250,000 per individual. It is a modest reform – supported by farmers and ranchers across the country – that would triple taxpayers' savings, help preserve family farms, and signal the direction of long-term reform.

2. The Senate should revisit the amendment I worked on with Minority Leader John Boehner to eliminate commodity producers' ability to game the system by “day trading.” This would stop farmers from being able to lock in a loan deficiency payment because of a short-term abnormality in the market, as we saw happen with Hurricane Katrina, when farmers were able to sell their corn later and earn extra payments that cost taxpayers \$3.6 billion.

3. The Senate should tackle crop insurance system reform, where companies making record profits continue to receive massive subsidies. Congressional hearings have demonstrated that the current system loses 40% of every premium dollar before any money gets to farmers.

4. One of the worst areas of unjustified government agriculture interference is our sugar quota program. This protectionist holdover from an earlier era costs U.S. consumers over \$1 billion per year. However outrageous the sugar program, the sad political reality is that there are powerful interests that consistently block meaningful reforms. At the very least, we should not allow this program to become worse, which the House bill currently does. The Senate should first keep it as it is today, which will represent a modest victory.

5. Savings generated by Farm Bill reforms should be reallocated to taxpayers in the form of deficit reduction and reinvested in healthy and local foods, conservation, nutrition, marketing, research and rural development programs. Strengthening these initiatives would do more for our communities than giving money to the largest farm operations in a few, select congressional districts. In fact, studies have shown that this simple reallocation of resources could bring an additional \$130 million dollars to Oregon and that all parts of the state would benefit.

By putting pressure on established agricultural interests, my reform-minded colleagues and I were able to force significant changes in the House – though not enough to merit my final vote. Now the Senate must exert the same pressure to challenge entrenched interests and push serious reforms. The public voice of organizations, churches and editorials – like the one in the Register-Guard last Saturday – adds needed pressure as the Farm Bill weaves its way through the Senate, the Conference Committee, and ultimately to the President for his signature or veto.

We still have an opportunity to reform this critical piece of legislation and I will continue working to ensure that the final 2007 Farm Bill is better for the taxpayer, better for the environment and, most important, better for Oregon's farmers and ranchers.